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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 004403

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/18/2016

TAGS: [PINS](#) [KISL](#) [PTER](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: BOMBING CHARGES AGAINST MILF LEADERS COMPLICATE
PEACE PROCESS

REF: A. MANILA 4343

[1](#)B. MANILA 4221

Classified By: POL/C Scott Bellard for reasons 1.4 (b) and (c).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) Chairman Murad and other MILF members are now facing preliminary charges related to the recent bombings in Mindanao that left six dead and over 30 wounded, despite a lack of direct evidence. Presidential Adviser for the Peace Process Dureza offered his personal assurances to the MILF leadership that prosecutors would dismiss these charges, while expressing hope for MILF assistance in bringing the real bombing suspects, including a former MILF member, to justice. Rather than derailing peace talks further, this latest development is an opportunity for the MILF leadership again to do the right thing -- as it did when it forced key ASG and JI leaders to leave Maguindanao in 2005 -- by handing over those rogue elements involved in the recent deadly bombings to GRP authorities under the auspices of the Ad Hoc Joint Action Group (AHJAG). End Summary.

A "Tactical Decision"

[1](#)2. (C) Presidential Advisor for the Peace Process "Jess" Dureza on October 18 confirmed to POL/C that MILF Chairman Al-Haj Murad Ibrahim and about 20 other senior MILF officials are now facing preliminary charges related to the October 10 and 11 bombings in Tacurong, Sultan Kudurat, and Makilala that left six dead and over 30 wounded. (Jemaah Islamiyah operatives Dulmatin and Umar Patek are also cited in the charges, along with a Pakistani national, according to government prosecutor Al Calica.) Dureza commented that he had personally reviewed the charges and, as a lawyer, had found no substance in the accusations against Murad and the other MILF leaders. He speculated that the filing had been a "tactical decision" by the provincial Philippine National Police (PNP) chief in order to pressure the MILF to turn over the actual suspected bombers, whom some MILF commanders are apparently harboring (ref a).

[1](#)3. (C) Dureza said that he had immediately called MILF headquarters upon receiving the news on the evening of October 17 in order to assure the MILF that the GRP did not sanction this move, nor was it in any way a reflection of a harder-line policy against the MILF. He added that Chairman Murad had been on the verge of convening a Central Committee meeting to discuss how to react. Dureza said that he had offered his "personal assurances" that the charges would not go forward, predicting that the prosecutor would dismiss them as baseless, so the MILF leaders would not go to trial. He

said that he nonetheless continued to hope that the MILF would turn over the suspected bombers in its midst.

14. (C) According to Embassy contacts, National Security Adviser Norberto Gonzales would meet with senior PNP officials in Cagayan de Oro, Mindanao on October 18 to discuss the charges against the MILF leadership.

Former MILF Member is Prime Suspect

15. (C) GRP Peace Panel Negotiations Panel Director Ryan Sullivan explained separately that the local prosecutor's office will next conduct a preliminary investigation to determine if there is sufficient evidence to issue warrants of arrest for MILF Chairman Murad et al. He noted that North Cotabato Governor Emmanuel Pinol had been especially vocal about the MILF leadership's alleged role in the bombings, despite a lack of evidence. He added that authorities do believe that one of the prime bombing suspects is Abdul Basit Usman, whom the MILF had removed from its roster in 2003. Sullivan said that Basit, along with several other individuals outside the ranks of the MILF, have been operating as a "small cell" of "bombers for hire" rather than as a "MILF Special Operations Group." Head of the GRP negotiating Panel with the MILF Silvestre Afable separately linked these for-hire bombers to Abu Solaiman and the Abu Sayyaf Group, as well as possibly to JI operatives in Sulu. Sullivan added that the AHJAG and PNP are currently coordinating their efforts to locate and apprehend Basit. (DCM and Pol/C will meet on October 20 with Brigadier General Benjamin Dolorfino to discuss the AHJAG role and other aspects of the peace process.)

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Comment

16. (C) Given the considerable difficulties already facing the GRP/MILF peace talks of late, notably over ancestral domain, MILF leaders may well be suspicious that these charges are a hardball move by the GRP to bring the MILF back to the negotiating table on the GRP's terms. This does not appear to be the case, nor would it be apt to work if it were. Assuming that cooler heads on both sides prevail, this is more importantly an opportunity for the MILF again to do the right thing -- as it did when it forced key ASG and JI leaders to leave Maguindanao in 2005 -- by handing over those rogue elements under suspicion of involvement in the deadly bombings to GRP authorities through the AHJAG. Embodys, in our periodic contacts with senior MILF officials, will reinforce this point.

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